

## **“Following the Call”**

Tears rolled down Peter’s cheeks as he pulled out of his office’s parking lot for the last time. He knew Susan and the kids would understand, but that didn’t make it feel any less like a failure. Despite 15 years of hard work and dedicated service, Peter’s boss handed him a large cardboard box this morning and told him he was being “let go” due to “budget cuts.”

As he started to drive, he decided he didn’t want to go home just yet. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and glanced around at his immediate surroundings. A brown sign with white lettering caught his attention: PARK ENTRANCE – 500 FEET. He drove on until he found the entrance, a small gravel driveway nestled within a bank of trees.

There were a few other cars here. He spotted a woman in a bright blue windbreaker disappearing into the woods with an excited golden retriever by her side.

Peter parked away from the other cars. He knew his eyes and face were still red, and he didn’t want to garner any attention. Swallowing hard, he located the trail where he saw the woman and golden retriever go and headed towards it, his hands stuffed in his suit jacket pockets.

His dress shoes hitting the paved trail sounded so loud in such a peaceful place. However, he was quickly reassured as he moved down the trail that he would not be noticed. The woods were alive with bird calls that filled the air and practically drowned out his footsteps.

Peter walked at a steady pace, trying to de-clutter the worries that have been gathering in his mind since he left the office. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a particular call:

“Peter, Peter, Peter!”

It was coming from above him. He looked up and spotted a little gray and blue bird, and it was calling his name.

“Peter, Peter, Peter!”

Peter smiled sheepishly and kept walking. *Now I’m hearing things.* With every step the invasive worries seemed to come on stronger, rather than abate.

“Oh, dear me!” came another bird, crying from the trees. *Oh, dear me, indeed,* Peter thought, shaking his head. *What am I going to do?* He came to a fork in the trail.

“Here, here, come right here, dear!” came another bird call. It came from the right fork, so he chose that one.

After cresting a small hill, he noticed the same woman with the blue windbreaker and golden retriever sitting on a bench, admiring an impressive rocky ravine that was spread out before them, just off the path.

“What! What! Where? Where? See it! See it!” came another bird call.

Peter suddenly felt a strong inclination to talk to this woman, but then he thought of Susan and kept walking with his head bowed. Just as he passed, the woman spoke to him.

“That’s some hiking outfit!” she commented with a soft chuckle. Her tone was playful and friendly.

Peter stopped and turned, feeling his face grow hot. “Oh – hehe, yeah, well, I just got let go from my job today, so I came here to clear my head.”

The woman’s cheerful expression dropped into sadness for a moment, but quickly recovered. “Come sit,” she said, patting the bench. The golden retriever wagged his tail and regarded Peter with his warm, brown eyes.

“Tell me about it,” she said gently. “What did you used to do?” Peter sat down and explained his job, as well as the circumstances behind his termination this morning.

She nodded as she listened to him, and when he was finished, she grinned. "Well, it just so happens I am looking for a new accountant for my firm. You may have heard of it? I was on the cover of Fortune 500 magazine last month because we had a record-breaking year last year."

A cardinal landed on a fallen tree in front of them. "Cheerily, cheerily, cheerily!" it sang.

Peter felt his face grow hot once more. "My goodness, you're Martha Dunham! Forgive me for not recognizing you!"

"That's quite alright," she chuckled. "I don't get all dolled up to walk old Buster here." She patted the dog on the head. "So, what do you say? Would you like to come in for an interview this afternoon?"

"Peter, Peter, Peter!"

"Cheerily, cheerily, cheerily!"

"What! What! Where? Where? See it! See it!"

"Here, here, come right here, dear!"

Peter reached out his hand to shake Martha's. "I would love to."